

Arriving Empty Handed

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On a March afternoon in 1988, in a back room of my college cafeteria, Wayne Johnson shared news with me that would change my world forever. I remember him moments earlier urgently approaching the table where I was dining with my classmates. I remember the anxious look on his face when he asked me to come with him, saying that he had something important to tell me. At the time, Wayne Johnson and I were just acquaintances. He was an employee at the school. I was a student. Somehow, the responsibility had fallen to him to tell me that my mother had died. Can you imagine the vulnerability he must have felt, as he knew what he had to share, without knowing how best to do it, or how I would react? What must have been going through his mind as he walked me to the office space where we could meet in private?

Once we were both seated, he didn't hesitate. He let me have the simple truth.

I instantly started to cry. Her death wasn't totally unexpected to me. Still the finality of the news was shocking.

He reached out to me, sensing my need to be comforted, holding me in an embrace that was natural and needed.

I don't recall what I said. I'm guessing I offered through my tears some of the "I can't believe it"s and "Wow"s that come when we know that someone we love is gone for good.

I don't know how long we stayed there, in that embrace, with me weeping on Wayne's shoulder. Maybe a minute or two. Maybe less. However, I do know how the moment was broken, how the connection we were sharing was severed.

Wayne, no doubt searching for how to further comfort me, how to offer me compassion in this most tender of times, called upon what he knew best, or what he felt he should know best—his faith.

"God has plans that we cannot understand," he said.

I must have stiffened, but he kept going, telling me of God's love.

I pulled back, non-verbally telling him to stop it as I wiped the tears from my cheeks.

Suddenly I felt trapped in this tiny office and his good intentions. Wayne, sensing his sermon may not be what I needed, changed his strategy, and God love him for it.

“Is there someone I can ask to come be with you?”

I named one of my friends who had been sitting at the table with me before the world had changed. I hope I told Wayne “thank you” before he left, but I’m not sure that I did. In moments like these, gratitude isn’t the first thing on our minds.

Then he was gone. And I was alone. Not really where I wanted to be either.

Wayne must have told my friend the news. She entered the room and said nothing, taking the seat that Wayne had left, offering me the hug without words that he had abandoned.

She must have felt vulnerable in this odd moment with me, unsure of what to say or do. Unsure of what I most needed from her. Unsure of how to help. Unsure of nearly everything, I’m guessing, except uncertainty.

Perhaps she had to fight back the impulse to offer me her attempt at comforting words. Maybe she, too, was thinking about God’s plans, and wanting to tell me what she knew of the divine mystery. But she didn’t. And God love her for it.

Before long, she did speak. She asked questions without knowing the answers. She didn’t suggest what I should be feeling or thinking. She spoke of how she didn’t know what to say. She arrived empty handed. And it was exactly what I needed.

Arriving empty handed in this way does not come naturally to us, it seems. At least it hasn’t for me. In fact, I missed my own opportunity to arrive empty handed just a few minutes later.

I called my dad. I was old enough to understand that losing a wife is more intense than losing a mother. Now the vulnerability of not knowing what to say was mine to navigate. Could I offer anything that would comfort my father, I wondered. We stumbled through our awkward conversation. Who could blame us? Phone calls are difficult places to grieve. We can’t see. We can’t touch. We can’t gauge

anything other than the words or the silence that fill the air. And there was some silence on this call. I think it's the silence that can be most uncomfortable. It's the silence that can make us feel most vulnerable. Shouldn't we have something to say in these moments?

It was not my inclination to mention God's plans to my father. Still I fumbled my attempt to be present to him in the way I would have most wanted to be. I knew that my mom and dad had been struggling. The many years she had been battling with mental illness had taken a toll on their marriage. I couldn't imagine all that my dad may have been feeling in that moment. But, rather than risk the vulnerability to ask him, I jumped to assumption. Wanting to offer something into the silence other than "I'm sad" or "I'm sorry", something that might provide a silver lining to one of the darkest clouds imaginable, as if it had been my job to make this bad situation better, I spoke words I have wanted to take back ever since they fell out of my mouth.

"You must be relieved," I said.

My dad offered a one-word response: "What?"

It was a response of shock and, I sensed, some anger, too. A stiffening not unlike how I had responded to Wayne's suggestion that my mom's death was part of God's plan.

I knew I had taken a wrong turn. I quickly redirected the conversation. I'm not sure how I did it, with my foot lodged so fully in my mouth. But I did. Maybe because my dad let me. Soon we were off the phone, but I have not forgotten the call. Even these many years later, the memory of it still serves as a painful reminder that, sometimes, awkward silence is better left alone. We don't have to conjure up extra words when there are no words that make sense other than "I love you" and "I am here."

In these heavy-hearted moments, we don't have to come bearing gifts of the right words at the right time, as if such words even exist. In fact, to impose our own need for comfort or silver linings on others may be the least right thing we could do. I've been learning that the closest we can get to the right response is to just be present in our vulnerable unknowing. It's usually enough, I've learned, to arrive empty handed.

This notion of arriving empty handed comes from one of my mentors, the Rev. Barbara Pescan. She wrote of it in a newsletter column some years back, and I return to her wisdom often.

She wrote:

“To be with those who have lost someone...suddenly and tragically is to be there with your simple presence—stripped down to serve, and ready for what they may say or do or need. And, being there *is* important, without words, or with halting words that seem and probably *are* inadequate. And that is all right, and as it should be. We are enough as we are. In some situations...it hardly seems enough to know that our inarticulateness is enough. But, it is. What in the name of all that is holy can we imagine *saying* that would make a difference at such moments? In arriving ‘absolutely empty handed’ the visiting friend expresses faith in human relationship; deep understanding that something can come of the time we spend with one another; the profound respect for the worth and dignity of this human being, and for one’s own being, and for what can come of the meeting between the two. And, there is something in our humanity that, in barely believable circumstances, is an essentially healing presence—even without words.”¹

This arriving empty handed does not mean that we shouldn’t show up in tender times with loving gifts of food or favors or friendship. On the contrary, our presence in whatever ways we can offer it when we aren’t seeking to control the actions and reactions of those in pain, is exactly the kind of empty handed arrival that can make all the difference. In the midst of our messy, complicated, and painfully random lives, what else could there be?

UU minister Kate Braestrup, in her book *Here If You Need Me*, shares how grateful she was that people showed up after her husband Drew died in car accident that left her a widow with four young children. She writes:

“[Within an hour after Drew’s death]...my neighbor, an elderly woman I had exchanged no more than a dozen words with in the ten years [I’d]... lived in [the neighborhood knocked on my door]. She had pot holders on her hands, which held a pan of brownies

¹ Rev. Barbara Pescan, “Minister’s Column” *Evanston Unitarian News* Vol. XLIV, No. 7, April 14, 2004.

still hot from the oven, and tears were rolling down her cheeks. 'I just heard,' she said.

That pan of brownies was, it later turned out, the leading edge of a tsunami of food that came to my children and me, a wave that did not recede for many months after Drew's death. I didn't know that my family and I would be fed three meals a day for weeks and weeks. I did not anticipate that neighborhood men would come to drywall the playroom, build bookshelves, mow the lawn, get the oil changed in my car. I did not know that my house would be cleaned and the laundry done, that I would have embraces and listening ears, that I would not be abandoned to do the labor of mourning alone. All I knew was that my neighbor was standing on the front stoop with her brownies and her tears; she *was* the Good News.

'I wish I could do more,'" my neighbor said, and all I could think as I gazed at her, shining before me in the electric air, was *What more need there be on earth than this? Than you?*"²

I'm sure Kate's neighbor felt inadequate in what she had to offer, just as most of us do in these awkward moments. And yet the gift she brought was precious and perfect in its simplicity. Even with brownies to share, I contend that this woman arrived empty handed, at least empty handed in the spirit I offer today, just as the neighbors who would follow with their own offerings of presence.

I've learned that the most helpful presence that we can bring when our companions are hurting is the kind of empty-handed arrival that shows that we have faith in their ability to travel through their pain on their own terms, without our unsolicited advice or well-intentioned encouragement to move on or to get over it, without imposing our own need for a greater meaning by offering a silver lining explanation to their suffering. The empty handed arrival summed up in the maxim I picked up during my time as a hospital chaplain. The maxim that says, "The prayer you say before you enter a patient's room is far more important than the prayer you say in the patient's room."

The place where we may most easily see the value of arriving empty handed could be when we sit at the bedside of those who are dying. In his book *A Hidden Wholeness*, Quaker author Parker Palmer suggests that sitting with a dying person teaches us how to honor the solitudes of our companions with the dignity and respect they deserve. In these

² Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me*, (New York: Little Brown and Company, 2007), pp. 53-54

encounters, we can see that the other is not “a problem to be solved but a mystery to be honored.” Palmer writes, “As we find a way to stand respectfully on the edge of that mystery, we start to see that all of our relationships would be deepened if we could play the fixer role less frequently.” He says that being with the dying shows us:

“...we must overcome the fear that often distorts our relationships—the fear that causes us to turn away when the other reveals something too vexing, painful, or ugly to bear. Death may be all of this and more. And yet we hold the dying person in our gaze, our hearts, our prayers, knowing that it would be disrespectful to avert our eyes, that the only gift we have to offer in this moment is our undivided attention.”

Palmer applies this wisdom he has gained from being present to the dying to how we could be with those facing other kinds of struggles. Recalling his own experience of suffering, he writes:

“When I went into a deadly darkness that I had to walk alone, the darkness called clinical depression, I took comfort and strength from those few people who neither fled from me nor tried to save me but were simply present to me. Their willingness to be present revealed *their* faith that I had the inner resources to make this treacherous trek—quietly bolstering *my* faltering faith that perhaps, in fact, I did.”

He continues:

“I would sooner die in the company of someone practicing simple presence than I would die alone. And I know this...: we are all dying, all the time. So why wait for the last few hours before offering each other our presence? It is a gift we can give and receive right now....”³

A gift we can give and receive right now.

The gift of being present without expectations of how others should receive our presence,

The gift of leaning into uncomfortable silence, believing that the best thing to say when we don’t know what to say may be nothing at all, understanding that offering others unsolicited advice or imposing our version of “look on the bright side” can be demeaning if not damaging,

The gift of knowing that the prayer we say before we enter the room of a loved one is more important than the prayer we say in the room,

The gift of arriving empty handed.

³ Parker J. Palmer, *A Hidden Wholeness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), pp. 61-62.

Arriving empty handed is not easy for most of us. It takes practice.
It takes learning from our mistakes.
It takes a willingness to not turn away from tough things that others
are facing, knowing that we, too, will one day face our own challenges,
that we, too, will want companions with us as we do.
Not companions who will tell us how to feel,
or who will compare our circumstances to theirs.
Not companions who are eager to say that we should “get over it”
or who are so anxious to point out possible silver linings that they
forget that the cloud above us is still drenching us in sorrow.
Not companions who pretend to know things that they couldn’t
possibly know.

When facing our own challenges, our own tragedies,
we will want companions who can honor our solitude,
who will ask us to share the stories of our suffering with them without
judgment,
who will stand by us with an open heart and an open mind, curious
about the human journey they are sharing with us,
who will want to learn from us more than they want to teach us,
who will *see us as we have always wanted to be seen,*
as we ourselves
*have always wanted to see the world.*⁴

We will want companions who will arrive empty handed.

May we, too, be these companions for others.
May we, too, learn to arrive empty handed more often.
And may we know with deep assurance
that arriving empty handed will be enough.

⁴ Adapted from “Second Sight” by David Whyte (which was used as the reading for this service). http://www.davidwhyte.com/english_secondsight.html